

# NEOLIBERAL INDIVIDUALS

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Note: This post may be helpful in understanding the ideas here and in other posts in this series.

Many of my early posts at Emptywheel were devoted to neoliberalism. I focused on its impact on the national economy. I saw it as the intellectual (I use the term loosely) force behind the deregulation policies of both legacy parties in the post-Reagan era. These policies gave us several financial crashes that hurt millions of Americans. Also, they gave us at least 813 billionaires who have taken control of our government.

I thought that the success of Biden's Keynesian economic policies proved once and for all that neoliberalism was trash. I was wrong.

Neoliberalism had another deadly barb: homo economicus. This cursed idea is that human beings are isolated rational consumers focused on maximizing their own utility in head-to-head conflict with other consumers. This is a stupid, evil idea. I thought that even religious fundamentalists would reject it because their preachers insist that humans were created in the image of the Almighty, and conflict-based consumption could never be an attribute of an all-powerful Deity. I was wrong.

People who hold this view of themselves think that everything they have is the result of their own actions, and is the just reward for their goodness and risk-taking. If they have little or nothing, it's their own fault. They aren't good enough at the conflict, and deserve what they get.

**An ideal alternative**

Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition* lays out a better view of human nature. I say better because it emphasizes the potential of our species. In my last post I quoted this summary of her thinking on our current situation.

For Arendt modernity is characterized by the loss of the world, by which she means the restriction or elimination of the public sphere of action and speech in favor of the private world of introspection and the private pursuit of economic interests. ...

Snip

Arendt articulates her conception of modernity around a number of key features: these are world alienation ... World alienation refers to the loss of an intersubjectively constituted world of experience and action by means of which we establish our self-identity and an adequate sense of reality.

Arendt thinks we have lost the source of our power as human beings. In Chapter 28, she says that our power comes from our ability to engage with each other in the public sphere by speech and action. Power disappears when that ability is not present. She writes:

What first undermines and then kills political communities is loss of power and final impotence; and power cannot be stored up and kept in reserve for emergencies, like the instruments of violence, but exists only in its actualization. Where power is not actualized, it passes away, and history is full of examples that the greatest material riches cannot compensate for this loss.

Power is actualized only where word and deed have not parted company, where words are not empty and deeds not brutal, where words are not used to veil

intentions but to disclose realities,  
and deeds are not used to violate and  
destroy but to establish relations and  
create new realities. Kindle Edition p.  
200, my paragraphing.

I read Arendt as saying that we have the ability to make and enforce decisions as a group, but only if we are prepared to meet each other in open discussion, in a setting where “words are not used to veil intentions but to disclose realities” and actions are used “to create new realities”. I think she is saying that we have lost this capacity.

Arendt contrasts forms of government arising from her conception of power with tyranny. Chairman Mao said that political power comes from the barrel of a gun. Arendt disagrees. She says that isn’t power, it’s violence.

Tyrants destroy power by isolating the tyrant from the subjects, and by isolating the subjects from each other. The primary tool of the tyrant is violence, which, she says, is stronger than power. Subjects might be able to pursue their own interests in arts, crafts, or manufacture. But they are impotent, they lack the power to dream new dreams, to create new realities. She says that the tyrant has the ability even to take from the subjects their own projects. This is what happened in George Orwell’s *1984*.

## **Discussion**

1. The theoretical framework of Arendt’s views of power seems to harmonize with my story of human evolution through cooperation.
2. There is no place for speaking and acting in our current political structure. The Republicans are a top-down group. The rubes who support it take their marching orders from its lieutenants, especially right-wing preachers, right-wing talking heads, and the incredible array of anti-vaxxers, Qrazies, and grifters on right-wing social media. They gain power by isolating their voters from alternative views.

The Democratic Party is just as bad, but in a different way. How many times have you written a legislator on an issue and gotten a reply email saying thank you for your interest I love to hear from you little people vote for me and give me money now go buy stuff?

There are plenty of smart people identifying problems and offering solutions, and plenty more working to sharpen those ideas. But professional Democrats don't listen. They pat you on the head and smirk behind their hands. When things don't go their way they blame you. We have forged places to do this public work, but we are ignored by the rich people and out-of-date incumbents who dominate the party..

Democratic politicians do not see the left as an element of power. I have no idea where they think power comes from. Money? Incumbency? Their magnetic personalities?

2. The people who voted for Trump are responsible for our immediate situation. They refused to participate in good faith in the political system. Their motivation is irrelevant. They want something and like good neoliberals they don't care how they get it. Politics is a field of conflict, just like the fight for resources. They have internalized the neoliberal view of themselves as chimpanzees fighting over a termite mound.

If that means supporting a tyrant, then fine. The tyrant will crush their competitors and give them what they want.

3. The people who didn't vote in the last election abdicated their own potential power and their own capacity to participate in power. They quietly submit to whatever damage Trump and his henchmen inflict on them and their families. They have internalized the second part of Homo Economicus: they believe they deserve whatever happens to them. They are passive and unseeing, unable even to recognize the depravity of their treatment.

4. I think both Trump voters and non-voters are

to blame for our current situation. They cannot escape their responsibility and I will not excuse their behavior.

But they didn't act randomly. Their attitudes are created by their experiences in their environment. The people shaping those environment are the truly contemptible shitheads.

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